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Echoes of That Day in Dallas

Like everyone else, I can't forget it. I'd just finished my customary lunch-hour tour of the book and music shops of Times Square. I walked through the lobby of the New York Times, where I was then employed. As I waited for an elevator, I heard a woman talking frantically: "... Dallas ... the president ... shot ... may be dead." As soon as I reached my floor I raced to the wire-service ticker, there to stand horrified vigil through the afternoon and into the night.

I was 24 years old. More than half my life has been lived since that awful day. In some ways I put it behind me ages ago, in others I will never be rid of it. In this I am, I suspect, very much like millions of others of my generation, the one that was most deeply and irrevocably shaped by the assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy.

This will naturally be disputed by those of Kennedy's own generation, men and women now in their seventies who saw Kennedy's rise to the White House as their own assertion of national leadership. But by the time this came to pass they were mature adults with considerable experience of life, including that of warfare. My generation by contrast had entered adulthood on the wings of Kennedy's presidential candidacy; for better or worse he was the embodiment of our future, and his violent death called everything into question.

People who are too young to remember the 22nd of November, 1963, cannot begin to imagine how ghastly a day it was. Other events left their variously indelible marks on the memory of 20th-century America—the Titanic and the Lusitania, the stock market crash of 1929, Pearl Harbor, the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Sputnik—but none was as traumatic as this. The nation had become accustomed, thanks to Roosevelt and Eisenhower, to durable, impregnable presidencies; the bullets that killed Kennedy seemed to shatter the institution itself, leaving the ground beneath us no longer rock-solid but shaky and uncertain.

To be sure we do well to remember a couple of things. One is that in November 1963 the country was not exactly the paradigm of placidity that we now like to recall; not merely had it been through a great deal of upheaval in the late 1950s, but the first 2½ years of the Kennedy presidency had not been exactly triumphant. The other is that the assassination did not paralyze the country; to the contrary, Lyndon Johnson seized national leadership with unexpected sensitivity to psychological nuance and got us back on course with impressive speed.

The Kennedy presidency wasn't Camelot and Oswald's bullets didn't plunge us from a golden age into a dark one, mythology to the contrary notwithstanding. But for a long time that's how it seemed. Even those of us who had been dissatisfied with the actual if not symbolic progress of the Kennedy administration were unable to resist the great wave of sentimentality and

irresistible mythic potency. The realities of their lives were utterly irrelevant to the symbolic weight that their images assumed. To say that they were worshiped by millions of Americans is no exaggeration; if Kennedy's cult was vastly more populous than Dean's, their essential nature was the same.

Kennedy-worship lasted a long time. God knows I was for much of that time one of the loudest crooners in the choir. I bought all the funereal newspapers and magazines that poured forth after the assassination. I devoured the gospel chapter and verse as pronounced by such major prophets as William Manchester, Theodore Sorensen and Arthur Schlesinger and such minor ones as Evelyn Lincoln, Red Fay and Ken O'Donnell. I gobbled up each lugubrious television broadcast that celebrated each Kennedy anniversary, however minor; had videotape machines existed in those days, I would have filled my entire cathedral with Super Hi-Grade Kennedyiana.

By now the Great Awakening has subsided. That a few pockets of religiosity remain was attested to last week by the broadcast of various lamentations—the one I half-watched, “Jack,” on CBS, was an especially lurid mixture of prurience and piety—but time has healed most of the old wounds and stories about Kennedy's all-too-human shortcomings have closed the others. Thirty years after the fact we may at last have managed to put the assassination behind us.

But not entirely. The impregnable presidency is forever a thing of the past. The vulnerability of the White House is now taken for granted in a country that has become accustomed, if not entirely inured, to assault by firearms as a means of expressing personal grievance. One unexpected but direct consequence of this is that the presidency is so isolated from the body politic by the extreme protective measures now favored by the Secret Service that it exists in an impenetrable cocoon; given the violent directions in which our culture is evolving, it is impossible to imagine this cocoon becoming anything except even less accessible.

Yet however distant the presidency may have become, it assumed in the wake of the assassination a place in the popular imagination that is paradoxically intimate. Whether John Kennedy had what we like to call “style” is perhaps a matter of taste, but he left us with a bottomless yearning for presidents who can fulfill our fantasies about the image of leadership. This has more to do with Kennedy's death than his life. Certainly he was a man of great wit and presence; having been privileged to attend a couple of his press conferences, I can give personal testimony to both. But his much-celebrated interest in literature and the arts was largely a public-relations sham, and if one assumes that “style” has something to do with being a gentleman, then in no sense can he be said to have qualified.

But it was his “style” that lived on after his death, that was made holy by the circumstances of that death; it is his “style” against which that of every subsequent president has been measured. Kennedy was no martyr, yet he became one not merely in the popular imagination but, more important, in the calculations of those who manipulate that imagination. Style was everything for Kennedy, so it is certainly appropriate that style is all he left us, but it is a poor tool for the governance of a nation. As legacies go it leaves a lot to be desired.

hagiography that swept across the nation. It was as though the rivulet of emotion that had been stirred by the death of James Dean eight years earlier suddenly had become a mighty ocean, engulfing the entire nation in grief and hero-worship.

The comparison with James Dean is by no means idle. Both the movie actor who died in an auto crash and the president who was killed by an assassin became, immediately after their deaths, figures of